



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Faltering education is a national emergency, fix it now



MANZOOR AHMED

Professor Emeritus, BRAC University; Chairperson, Bangladesh ECD Network and Adviser to the Campaign for Popular Education.

When the foundation of governance of the state is shaky, public services such as education and healthcare also become weak and tottering. The general dysfunctionalities of state operations in Bangladesh are copiously reflected in the education system. The impact of failures in education, however, is much graver than just dysfunctional services. It puts in jeopardy the life prospects of the next generation and places at risk the future of the nation.

LONG-STANDING REFORM CRISIS
The crisis in our education has been much discussed for a long time. A quick historical sketch will bear this out.

There are idealised and romanticised narratives of the ancient education system of the subcontinent from the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic past – the residential monastic and gurukul institutions and makhtabs and madrasas – under monarchies and kingdoms. In the feudal societies of the time, education was the preserve of a tiny privileged elite. Moreover, emphasising theology and religion, it failed to promote new knowledge and discovery that would nurture science and technology and adapt to the evolving modern world. It is the Western colonisers who introduced

modern education in our part of the world in the 18th century, but with a limited scope and aim to serve the purposes of the colonial administration. The quasi-colonial rule of Pakistan since 1947 saw essentially the colonial system continuing, keeping the opportunities, scope and purposes of education restricted.

In independent Bangladesh, the education commission headed by Dr. Qudrat-e-Khuda was tasked in 1972 to design an education system appropriate for a new nation. The commission submitted its report to the government in 1974. The assassination of President Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the political shift that followed sent the Khuda Commission report to the archive. Since then every military and elected political regime has appointed one or more education reform commissions. We may recall the long list of these commissions – Kazi Zafar Commission (1978) under General Ziaur Rahman, Mazid Khan Commission (1983) and Mofizuddin Ahmed Commission (1988) under General H.M. Ershad, and Shamsul Haq Commission (1997) under the first Sheikh Hasina Government (1996-2001). Two commissions were appointed

– M.A. Bari Commission (2001) and Moniruzzaman Mia Commission (2003) – by the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (2001-2006). The last was the Commission co-led by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury and economist Quazi Khaliquzzaman Ahmad appointed in 2009 during Sheikh Hasina's second term. The 2010 National Education Policy based on the commission's proposals still remains in operation.

In retrospect, it can be said that none of these commissions foresaw a basic change in the education system; they anticipated incremental change and some reform essentially within the existing structure. There was no vision of transformative change in respect to the right to education, the state's obligation to fulfil this right, new thinking about the status and role of teachers, and decentralised education governance. It was also interesting that none of these were debated and approved by Parliament except the last one, and a systematic and concerted effort was not initiated to implement the recommendations.

In the case of the Shamsul Haq Commission, established during the first Hasina administration, the report was submitted to the government in

1998. Subsequently, a government-appointed committee drafted a national education policy in 2000, taking the Commission's recommendations into account.

FALTERING REFORM DECISION-MAKING

The national education policy of 2000 approved by the government did not anticipate basic change in promoting the right to education, bringing about qualitative change in public provisions

that it should not be only the privileged kids going to private kindergartens who have the chance to learn English. It didn't matter that the decision to teach it from class one in primary school became a false promise and a farce and distorted the purpose of primary education. Moreover, the syllabus for English was framed for the secondary level on the assumption that students enter class six with five years of instruction in English, which turned

KEY POINTS

1. Weak governance has driven long-term education failures, threatening national development and future generations.
2. Successive commissions delivered only incremental reforms, lacking transformative vision and effective implementation.
3. Populist, top-down decisions, such as compulsory early English, have weakened foundational learning.
4. The 2010 policy recognised key problems but retained fragmented, centralised structures.
5. Missed reform opportunities demand urgent, coherent, and participatory system-wide education reform.



VISUAL: MAHIYA TABASSUM

or structural changes in education management. Its claim to fame may be that this policy gave legitimacy to the introduction of teaching English from class one in primary school, which was introduced by a diktat of General Ershad in the mid-1980s. Until then, English as a language was introduced lightly at the primary level, starting at class three, with lessons based on letters, numbers and rhymes. Proficiency in English was supposed to be acquired at the secondary level because a qualified English teacher could be appointed at that level. At the primary level up to class five, teachers are not appointed subject-wise; they are expected to teach all subjects with a focus on literacy in the main national language and numeracy.

The reality is that most primary teachers lack the proficiency to teach English. English as a compulsory subject throughout the primary school years became a waste of time and effort and a cause of much frustration for both students and teachers. More harmfully, it took precious learning time away from teaching the foundational literacy and numeracy skills, thus adversely affecting all of primary education.

The General's populist argument in deciding to start teaching English from class one in all primary schools was

out to be a problem, since the children learned little English in their primary classes. The result is that most of the high school graduates today cannot read, write or communicate in English even at a basic level. The secondary public examination results also show a high percentage of failing scores in English, affecting the total pass rate.

Once a populist decision is proclaimed, it becomes difficult to have a rational reconsideration of the issue. The half-truth that a foreign language has to be learned early as a child is propagated and used to justify the futile toil of teaching English from class one, despite the worldwide evidence that a language can be learned by a motivated learner at any age.

This particular episode on English in primary school is symptomatic of the education decision-making process, often based on populist arguments and diktats from high-ups rather than evidence-based analysis with stakeholder participation, especially those involved in the education system. Political and partisan advantage or other vested interests, rather than educational logic and children's interest, are frequently the dominant consideration in educational decision-making.